

## Populism and feminist politics: The cases of Finland and Spain

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**Abstract.** While populism has been subject to growing scholarly interest, its relationship to feminist politics has remained conspicuously understudied. This article investigates this relationship by analysing two cases of European populism: left populism in Spain (Podemos), and right populism in Finland (the Finns Party). The questions asked, and the challenges posed to feminist politics from populist political forces are intriguing: How is feminist politics articulated in both left and right populism? What differences can be discerned between left and right populism for feminist politics? To explore this, the article analyses three core dimensions: (1) political representation: descriptive representation (numbers of women, men and minority positions) and substantive representation (policy content in relation to gender equality); (2) populist parties' formal and informal gender institutions such as internal quotas, gender equality plans and institutional culture; and (3) dedicated spaces for feminist politics such as women's sections or feminist groups. It is argued that political ideology matters for feminist politics, and while left parties are more responsive to feminist concerns and populism poses specific problems for feminist politics, it is the gendered culture of political parties that ensures both left and right parties are problematic for feminist politics.

**Keywords:** populism; feminist politics; Finland; Spain

### Introduction

Populism has become an increasingly salient political phenomenon that has given rise to a burgeoning scholarship. However, the relationship between populist movements and/or parties with feminist politics has rarely been considered. 'Gender' is a difficult concept for both populist politics and research. Populist politics suggests that the most important distinction in society is between 'the pure people' and 'the corrupt elite' (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2015; Mudde 2004). A focus on gender however, exposes how notions of 'the people' embody highly gendered expectations of the roles women and men hold. The assumed universality of populist subjects and their experiences (Köttig et al. 2017) have significant consequences when populist politics are considered in terms of gender and other inequalities (Norocel 2013).

Populism is an essentially contested concept in academic debates (Laclau 2005; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). It takes many forms in politics and applies to movements and parties from the political left and right. In this context, Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2013: 151) adopt a 'minimal definition' where populism is argued to comprise three features: attacking 'the elite'; defending the interests of 'the common people'; and proclaiming 'popular sovereignty as the only legitimate source of political power'. In making this minimal definition, the authors were able to compare expressions of populism in Latin America and Europe, and make a distinction between what they termed 'exclusionary populism'

in Europe and ‘inclusionary populism’ in Latin America: the former related to right-wing ideologies and the latter to those of the left.

After the sustained electoral successes of left populists in Spain and Greece, and the radical right populists in Northern Europe, this distinction is now applicable in Europe. These nascent successes have not only shaken the traditional structures of party politics (e.g., the two-party system in Spain), but also heightened the importance of political parties as a site of solutions to economic, social and political crises. In this context, the question for feminist scholars becomes one of *how* to analyse gender and feminist politics in left and right populism. ‘Feminist politics’ refers here to actions that aim to transform unequal gendered power relations, norms and practices (Ferree 2006).

Gender analyses addressing this question, and comparisons of left and right populist parties in Europe through a feminist lens, remain scarce. This article fills the gap by investigating feminist politics in two examples of European populism in Spain and Finland. We selected these cases because they ‘represent prototypical examples of the current type of populism that is prevalent’ (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2013: 148) in these contexts: Podemos in Spain of the left, and the Finns Party in Finland of the right. These cases allow for the exploration of how political ideology interacts with a country’s gender norms and culture (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2015). We ask the following research questions: What is the relationship between populism and feminist politics? How is feminist politics articulated in left and right populism? What is the difference between left and right populism for feminist politics?

With left parties being more open to feminist concerns, we argue that political ideology still matters for feminist politics; however, the thin-centred component of both left and right populism poses specific problems for feminist politics. These problems derive from core assumptions that all strands of populism share: the narrative of politics as a confrontation between two antagonistic blocs, both constructed as homogeneous categories – the ‘elites’ and ‘the people’. Other challenges to feminist politics are not specific to populism but, as feminist institutionalism shows, depend on the deeply gendered culture of political parties (Bjarnegård 2013; Kenny 2013; Kenny & Verge 2016), which make both inclusionary and exclusionary populist parties a challenge for feminist politics.

The article proceeds as follows. First, we conceptualise populism and feminist politics from the extant scholarship. Second, we explain the case selection, methods and research material. Third, the empirical section addresses the manifestation of populism and its relationship to feminist politics in Finland and Spain by comparing the Finns Party and Podemos.

## **Populism and feminist politics**

Populism is a contested political phenomenon that has been conceptualised as anything from a political strategy or style to an experiment (De la Torre & Peruzzotti 2008; Frei & Rovira Kaltwasser 2008; Castaño 2017). For the purposes of this article, we draw on Mudde (2004: 543) whose minimal definition conceives of populism as ‘a thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite”, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people’. This minimal definition, as

Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2013) argue, allows analysts to empirically study different manifestations of populism, coming from the left and right of the political spectrum, without top loading various bundles of typological ingredients.

Depending on the approach one adopts, populism and feminism can share certain similarities in how they conceptualise dominant and subordinated groups, and 'the people'. Rather than 'the elites' and 'the people', feminism speaks of men as the dominant group and women as subordinated. Some feminist approaches define the people more homogeneously, meaning that gender is the socially constructed relation between homogeneous groups of women and men. Others conceptualise gender in more plural ways, as intersectional feminists do, by addressing the intersection of gender with other inequalities such as race, class or sexuality (Kantola & Lombardo 2017).

Indeed, feminist politics can be conceptualised in many ways. We here define it as actions that aim to transform unequal gendered power relations, norms and practices (Ferree 2006) through the politicisation of gender issues and the empowerment of women. 'Politicisation' refers to the role of feminist politics as one rooted in the ongoing political contestation around the meaning of gender, and its intersection with other inequalities. It is this contestation that allows for the expression of different voices, and the inclusion of new issues such as gender violence or care, to the political agenda (Lombardo & Verloo 2009). The empowerment of women is a central goal of feminist politics that Ferree and Gamson (2003) define in relation to the dimensions of autonomy and authority. 'Autonomy' means freedom to make life choices, enabled by legislation granting women equal economic independence and sexual and reproductive rights. 'Authority' means being present and active in decision-making processes and having women's demands recognised as legitimate.

The relationship between populism and feminist politics in both left and right parties in Europe remains under-researched. Abi-Hassan (2017: 441) argues that the 'treatment of gender issues in populism is highly contextualized', which makes the relation between populism and gender dependent on variant cultural and political contexts, and the personal goals and ideas of particular populist leaders. Very few academic studies address gender and left populist parties. Kampwirth's (2010) edited collection on women and Latin American populism shows an ambivalent relationship between feminist movements and left populist leaders. More strikingly, Roth and Baird (2017) consider left populism incompatible with gender equality. They argue that these parties may reinforce patriarchy because they tend to reward men and undervalue women and feminism. The homogenising discourse about 'the people' excludes intersectional feminist political practices (Roth & Baird 2017). Left populism may speak fondly of equality, but in these accounts, it has failed to act in accordance with these principles.

Feminist research has been more attentive to the strengthening of radical right populism than the trajectory of left populism in Europe. Feminist studies have shown how the discourse of radical right groups is visibly anti-feminist, anti-LGBT, conservative, nationalist, racist, xenophobic, Islamophobic and anti-democratic (Köttig et al. 2017; Spierings & Zaslove 2015). The few gender issues that appear on the far-right agenda, support traditional family and conservative gender roles, and unashamedly oppose women's sexual and reproductive rights and LGBT rights (Köttig et al. 2017; Norocel 2013). Gender equality discourse is instrumentalised against immigration (Keskinen et al. 2016; Siim et al. 2016;

Meret 2015) and feminist politics is framed as a dangerous 'gender ideology' (Kuhar & Paternotte 2017).

In sum, it is both intriguing and challenging to study left and right populism and their engagements with feminist politics. A further challenge comes from our aim to compare left and right populism in Europe. Comparative studies of gender in left and right populism have only emerged recently. One such study, by Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2015) compared populist parties from the right (The Netherlands and Denmark) and the left (Bolivia and Venezuela) to understand what factors influenced their gender politics. By analysing the parties' representation of women, gender equality policies and discourses on women, they found that the gender politics of populist parties were influenced by a combination of the national cultural context and political ideology. Right-wing populists support the status quo about gender equality within the North European more 'women-friendly' context, while left-wing populists within the more patriarchal South American context show progressive features. Ideology and culture interact in complex ways in the two cases: the higher parliamentary representation of women for left populist Latin-American parties rather than right North European examples seem to indicate the influence of (left) ideology on gender; the more explicit sexism in discourses of left populist South American political leaders than those of right North European leaders reflects how a stronger patriarchal culture can impact on leftist ideology.

In considering both left and right populist parties in the European context, we develop the gender comparisons further by deepening the analysis of feminist politics. Drawing on scholarly debates within gender and politics, we operationalise feminist politics through the analysis of the following dimensions: (1) political representation: descriptive representation (numbers of women and men and minorities, positions) and substantive representation (policy content in relation to gender equality); (2) populist parties' formal and informal gender institutions such as quotas, gender equality plans and institutional culture; and (3) specific dedicated spaces for feminist politics such as women's organisations/sections or feminist groups.

We have determined the importance of these dimensions from the extensive literature on gender and party politics. This literature has focused first on variant aspects of the representative process. Analyses of descriptive representation has shown that women have made inroads to political parties as party workers, elected representatives and party leaders, while also underlining how parties have become 'feminised' (Childs & Webb 2012; Lovenduski 2005). As a corollary to this, concepts of women's substantive representation have generated empirical and theoretical work showing how the interests of women are translated into policies, and by whom, when and where this happens (Celis et al. 2014). Second, gender analysis has shifted from studying formal institutions to understanding how informal institutions (norms, practices, customs) act as barriers to gender justice in party politics. Identifying a number of important informal institutions, gender scholars have shown how women have been subjected to 'super-surveillance', and have carried the 'burden of doubt' about their competence. Studies have revealed how women who do not conform to the norm and show political ambition or assertiveness face informal gendered sanctions such as removal from high ranked office or covertly punished by a subtle weakening of their competencies. Women are often assigned stereotypical gender roles in parties; 'the ideal' candidate tending to be associated with stereotypical masculinity traits such as ambition,

competitiveness and aggressiveness (Verge & De la Fuente 2014: 73; Kenny 2013). Other informal institutions include seeking political consensus in informal networks to which women's access is limited, particularly due to care responsibilities (Bjarnegård 2013: 24; Verge and De la Fuente 2014: 73). Finally, feminist research considers the specific spaces for feminist politics, showing the extent to which there are women's organisations within political parties (Childs & Kittilson 2016) and critically examining their role (Erzeel & Vandeleene 2014).

### **Case selection, methods and research material**

This article investigates two cases of populism in Spain and in Finland. Both are respectively representative of left and right populism because of their emphasis on socioeconomic equality, the inclusion of minorities and a more cosmopolitan vision of the world for the left; and the authoritarian and exclusionary position towards non-native people and in favour of homogeneous communities for the right (Merkel & Kneip 2018; March 2017; Mudde 2007). The roots of the Finns Party (*Perussuomalaiset/Sannfinländarna*) are in the 1950s and 1960s populist agrarian movement in Finland. The Finns Party can be characterised as anti-elitist, conservative in terms of moral values, anti-European Union and anti-immigration. Comparatively, the party is termed 'right populist' rather than 'radical right populist' (Palonen & Saresma 2017) because it has some left populist elements in its programmes and among candidates and politicians, such as an emphasis on social justice and poverty reduction (Ylä-Anttila & Luhtakallio 2017: 30).

The Finns Party has had significant electoral successes during the 2010s. In the 2011 parliamentary elections, the party sent shock waves across Finnish society by winning 19.1 per cent of the national vote; up from a mere 4 per cent and five MPs in 2007. In 2015, the party renewed its position with only a slight loss in the vote (18.2 per cent, and second biggest party in parliament with 38 MPs) and entered the centre-right coalition government. After supporting the government's austerity measures targeted at low-income working-class people, the support for the party dropped to 8 per cent by 2016 (Kuisma & Nygård 2017: 73). The Finns Party split into two after the party's 2017 congress with then leader Timo Soini, four other ministers and the Speaker of the Parliament forming their own parliamentary group with supporting MPs, and establishing a new party – the Blue Future.

For a party that was created only a few months before the 2014 European Parliament (EP) elections, Podemos had a 'fast and furious' breakthrough. They obtained five seats in the EP, achieved important results in the 2015 regional and local elections, and became the third largest party in the Spanish general elections of 2015 (20.7 per cent and 69 seats) (Rodríguez et al. 2016). The new left populist party, whose name means 'We can', claimed to bring a different kind of politics to the fore, one that is closer to peoples' demands of social justice and effective democracy. Podemos represented a response to Spain's political crisis due to its institutional channelling of both anti-austerity concerns that emerged in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis (Calvo & Álvarez 2015) and the political disaffection of left-wing, and predominantly younger, voters with traditional parties, democracy and political institutions, evinced by a consistent transfer of votes from the Socialist Party (Orriols & Cordero 2016).

The intellectual germination of Podemos has its roots in a group of predominantly male political scientists, ideologically influenced by the theories of Laclau and Mouffe, and developed in part from their experience as policy advisors to Latin American left populist governments. With its antagonistic rhetoric, Podemos presents itself as a 'new politics' that aims to satisfy 'the people's' social demands against what they call the 'caste', or the corrupted political and economic 'elites'. The party's communication strategy has boosted the figure of Pablo Iglesias as a charismatic leader. Iglesias' leadership profile ambiguously unites an aggressive and competitive discourse and accusations of hierarchical 'alpha-male' behaviour, with an intellectual and educated style (Caravantes 2018; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2015).

Both Podemos and the Finns Party represent populist parties who occupy two very different political contexts; both of which have shaped how they interact with feminist politics. On the basis of political ideology alone, previous studies on the place of gender in European left and right parties have generated expectations that the leftist Podemos would act as a promoter of gender equality, while the right-wing Finns Party would oppose gender equality (Keith & Verge 2016; Verge 2013). Our cases thus allow for a comparative exploration of how political ideology interacts with particular cultures regarding gender norms. Finland represents the right-wing populism within a more women-friendly Nordic context, and Spain represents the left-wing populism within a more patriarchal Southern European context. However, this assumption comes with a degree of nuance since Spain cannot be characterised as a typically Southern state in terms of gender equality due to significant advances in its gender regime over the last two decades (Lombardo 2017; Verge 2013). Similarly, gender equality in Finnish politics has traditionally been high, but there have been backlashes in recent years (EIGE 2017). It is therefore interesting to analyse how these contextual features have affected feminist politics in Spain's left and Finland's right populist parties.

Methodologically, the study is based on qualitative content analysis of different research materials. Our time frame was 2014–2018 and covered the key years of electoral success for the populist parties in both countries. First, we analysed policy documents of the two parties, which were selected based on their references to feminist politics. These included both internal policies on party procedures and public policy positions. In the case of Podemos, they include the Party Statutes (Podemos 2015a); two programmatic documents by the party gender equality group at the central level (Podemos 2015b, 2017); the 2015 and 2016 electoral programs (Podemos 2016; 2015c); and legislative initiatives on gender equality proposed by the Podemos parliamentary group in the 2016 legislature. In the case of the Finns Party, policy documents included the party's election manifestos from the 2015 parliamentary elections, the government programme (Government of Finland 2015) and the government's gender equality programme (Government of Finland 2016).

Second, we analysed five semi-structured interviews with women MPs of the Finns Party and five semi-structured interviews with women MPs of Podemos. All interviews were conducted in the parliament or public caf  s, lasted for 1–2 hours and were later transcribed. The interview questions focused on internal party practices from the point of view of gender and feminism. All interviewees were promised full confidentiality and anonymity.



## **Descriptive representation in Podemos and the Finns Party**

For decades, a key issue for feminist politics has been to ensure women's equal participation in politics. This aspect of feminising politics can be studied by focusing on descriptive representation in the two populist parties. When comparing in terms of women's descriptive representation in parliament, Podemos shows a markedly higher percentage of women MPs than the Finns Party: 47.9 per cent in 2016 (Podemos) versus 32 per cent in 2015 (the Finns Party).<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, women's representation in the parliamentary group of the Finns Party is high when compared to populist parties across Europe, reflecting the Finnish gender equality regime.

Left populist Podemos shows greater diversity in age and class. MPs from the Podemos' coalition are the youngest in parliament with an average age of 41 years, which is seven years below the average age of Spanish MPs (Caravantes 2018), and Podemos female MPs show the lowest economic means as compared to the other parties' female MPs (Méndez 2017). Podemos' MPs also differ from the average MPs since they include a number of social movement activists and the first black female MP (Caravantes 2018). However, Podemos falls short of gender parity in key positions of power and in central decision-making bodies. The Secretary-General and the main party leadership are men. Traditional gender roles in which women mostly do coordinating work and men take the most decision-making positions are commonly reproduced (see Interview, 13 September 2018): while women represent 57 per cent of those in the Council of Coordination, in the Regional General Secretaries, which are bodies with greater political power, female representation more than halves to 21.4 per cent. Finally, women constitute 50 per cent of members in the Secretariat of Organisation and Programme, but the Secretary is a man.<sup>2</sup> The only prominent role given to a woman is that of party's spokesperson in parliament from 2017 onwards.

The Finns Party have also always been led by a man. The party elected its first female party secretary in 2013 after having men in this position for 18 years. The party has also elected women as one of its three vice leaders. There are currently four men and three women on the board of the party. The electoral victory of the Finns Party was closely linked with a general masculinisation of Finnish politics. The party broke the long tradition of nominating equal numbers of women and men to ministerial portfolios when they entered the government in 2015 and nominated only one woman for their four ministers. It did, however, nominate a young woman for the prestigious role of Speaker of the Parliament for the years 2015–2018.

Political ideology, then, plays a significant role in shaping the patterns of parliamentary representation. Left populist Podemos has advanced the numbers of women in parliament in line with a general ethos for equality. Similarly, in the Finnish case, the culture of women having high levels of participation in politics ensured that there was a fairly high level of women in parliament. Yet, in both parties, key positions of power belong to men.

## **Substantive representation**

Gender and politics scholars have increasingly focused on substantive representation – that is to say, an analysis of the gender content and impact of party policies. We argue that in terms of substantive representation political ideology matters more than in descriptive

representation: while Podemos advanced gender equality policies, the Finns Party directly opposed many measures, and while gender equality is on the agenda of Podemos, the Finns Party use gender politics to build its anti-gender equality identity.

Gender equality and diversity were present in Podemos' programme for the 2015 general elections (Podemos 2015c), including proposals that ranged from gender mainstreaming to addressing sexist violence, to sexual and gender identity discrimination, reconciliation and recognising LGBT and single-parent families. The programme also includes demands from the feminist movement about ratifying the International Labour Organisation Convention 189 on domestic workers' rights and derogating the reform of the abortion law to eliminate restrictions to the rights of women under 18.

Podemos' parliamentary group, in coalition with other political forces (GCUP-EC-EM), also made several proposals on gender equality (three legislative and 12 non-legislative proposals between July 2016 and June 2017). The three legislative proposals addressed care and parental leave rights, and gender-based violence (Méndez 2017). One of the non-legislative proposals concerned a longstanding feminist demand for equal non-transferrable parental leave rights, the draft for which was prepared by the feminist civil society platform PPINA.<sup>3</sup> This legislative activity shows a level of progress with regard to women's substantive representation.

Commitment to feminist politics, expressed in a language that is closer to feminist movements' than parties' vocabulary (e.g., 'feminism', 'bodily autonomy'), emerged in our interview material (Interview, 13 June 2018) and was proclaimed in two documents elaborated by the Feminism Podemos 'circle' at state level: the 2015 feminist manifesto, and the document approved in the second Podemos citizenship assembly called 'Feminism in Movement for All (Women)'.

The 2015 Podemos Feminisms Manifesto expressed a general commitment to feminist politics from gender and intersectional perspectives (Podemos 2015b). It favoured a feminist economy of care that puts life at the centre (see also Interview, 13 June 2018), supported the recognition of equal parental rights, the needs of marginalised women and the deconstruction of male privileges. It promoted action to ensure women's participation in electoral campaigns, zipper lists favouring female candidates and the visibility of feminism in political debates.

The 2017 document 'Feminism in Movement for All (Women)' included a political and an organisational part (Podemos 2017). The political section embraced radical democracy and gender justice, the importance of decentralised politics, territorial and bodily autonomy, gender mainstreaming, intersectional feminist politics, feminist economy and life sustainability, and gender violence. It criticised male leadership and encouraged men to practice counterhegemonic masculinities (Podemos 2017: 14).

The organisational section of the manifesto included democratic parity, with measures such as a 50 per cent gender quota in Podemos lists, committees and spokespersons (Podemos 2017: 24–26). It aimed at 'depatriarchalising' the spaces of political participation through a gender equality plan, gender protocols for assembly functioning, good practices, women's meetings and measures to allow equal political participation of carers (e.g., parental leave) (Podemos 2017: 27). The document also addresses the institutionalisation of gender equality in the party through the creation of different bodies, including a Secretary of Intersectional Feminisms and LGBTQI.



In contrast, the Finns Party has built its identity by opposing not only multiculturalism and diversity, but also feminism and gender equality (Askola 2017; Saresma 2017; Kovala & Pöysä 2017; Ylä-Anttila & Luhtakallio 2017). The party has actively opposed the liberal, diverse and equal values of feminist and anti-racist movements and activists. Tuija Saresma (2017: 121) suggests that the left populist elements of social and economic justice and equality declined significantly in the 2010s. In our interview material, one politician said women representatives continue to be interested in social and health politics. She suggested that these issues have traditionally been devalued in the party programmes and manifestos, which have been geared towards ‘masculine politics’ and the male voter (Interview, 26 March 2014). At the same time, the party’s discourses about gender equality have increasingly emphasised the threat of immigrants and men’s – as opposed to women’s – rights (Saresma 2017: 121). The traditional themes of Finnish gender equality politics are absent from the agenda of the women’s organisation in general, and the party writ large in particular, as evinced by the lack of references to gender equality in the party’s election manifestos (Ylä-Anttila & Luhtakallio 2017: 43).

To elicit a more nuanced understanding, we analysed the Finns Party’s election manifesto for the 2015 parliamentary elections. The manifesto is very detailed when compared to other political parties and reflects the need for the party to frame itself as a generalist party rather than a single-issue one. ‘Equality’ is not used as a word much and ‘gender equality’ not at all. Instead, they frequently use the word ‘inequality’ (*eriarvoisuus*) and the need to eradicate it. In relation to immigration, the manifesto specified that ‘equality’ means ‘equality of opportunity’ – a traditional liberal and conservative definition of equality as opposed to more left-wing definitions of equality of outcome. The manifesto confirmed the party’s stance on positive discrimination, which in relation to immigration is condemned.

In terms of policy issues, the election manifesto only stresses ‘family policy’, and there is no reference to anything that might be construed as ‘gender equality policy’. In many ways it is a self-congratulatory exercise in reifying the old-fashioned and conservative views. Family, is perceptibly constructed in the light of the latter, the only expression of difference is the recognition of divorced parents and one-parent families; same-sex couples, rainbow families and complex relationships, for example, are conspicuous in their absence. In general, all the categories used pose as genderless: old people, nursing staff, low-income people, families, disabled, entrepreneurs, immigrants. The key difference they choose to foreground in the programme is how ‘immigrants’ are perceived. For example, human and basic rights are for the ‘Finns’ only, while hiring foreign nursing staff is considered wrong. Gender equality policy is only addressed in the programme through a freedom-of-choice discourse. This discourse is very strong in relation to parental leave and reconciling work and family: ‘[W]e contend that the society has to support people in their individual pursuits to reconcile work and family, and equally to respect those parents who stay at home to care for their children.’

In the negotiations for the strategic government programme in 2015, the Finns Party successfully blocked any progressive gender equality policies. The ‘strategic government programme’ promoted a political economy based on strict austerity and a hardened anti-immigration policy. Feminist commentators denounced the sidelining of gender equality from the government’s agenda: gender equality was deemed both irrelevant and incompatible with the new policies and strategic governance for the first time in

20 years (Elomäki et al. 2018). Instead, the conservative-right-populist government adopted significant cuts in public services and benefits, including dismantling the hallmark element to the women-friendly welfare state – the statutory universal right to public childcare. The higher status given for the family is visible in that for the first time there is a designated minister for family affairs.

While strict immigration policy has been characteristic of Finnish policy for decades, policies were substantially hardened. The anti-immigration policies and racist rhetoric were highly gendered: Finnish women were to be protected from the violence of other culture's men (Keskinen 2012, 2013). Furthermore, the government's equality programme, criticised by several gender experts, foregrounded the figure of immigrant women to be 'helped' to reconcile work and family and to enter the labour market. Heli Askola (2017: 7) argues that this focus was clearly the impact of the Finns Party's policies. Immigrant women were singled out as needing special support, yet few concrete measures addressing their economic marginalisation were adopted. This highlighted the tokenistic character of the policy track. The focus was less about tangible support, but more to exploit the pejorative symbol of 'immigrant women'; its instrumental value was to differentiate them from majority women – tendency seen in other Nordic countries (Meret & Siim 2013; Mulinari & Neergaard 2014).

We conclude that gender equality was on the agenda of Podemos and feminists within the party actively pushed for it. The explicit reference to feminism and the connections with the autonomous feminist movement showed that Podemos aimed to distinguish itself from the familiar institutional language and feminist alliances of traditional left parties in Spain. Although gender equality was not a priority, nor was it mainstreamed in the politics of the party, there was progress in relation to both transformation (e.g., gender equality proposals) and empowerment (e.g., reflecting feminist demands) that meet some criteria in our definition of feminist politics. The version of right populism represented by the Finns Party is directly opposed to gender equality. The party's programmatic approach is very conservative and centred on the traditional family. In the Finnish context of a culturally strong gender equality discourse, the Finns Party stands out as atypical. The other right conservative parties know, and use, the language of gender equality, whereas the Finns Party deliberately do not and also do not care. For feminist politics, this has signified a counter empowerment: new feminist actors have been established to oppose the right populist politics (Elomäki & Kantola 2017).

### **Formal and informal gender institutions**

Gender and politics scholars have increasingly directed their efforts into studying gendered institutions of party politics. In relation to formal institutions, we noted that Podemos had a whole host of measures in place to advance gender equality, such as gender quotas and gender action plans. In contrast, the Finns Party were steadfastly opposed to any positive action which might advance women's political careers. They only have one recommendation related to gender: that there should be at least one woman among the four party chairperson positions.

Feminist institutionalism alerts us to the role that informal institutions (norms, practices) play in shaping gendered party politics. We argue that it is in relation to these informal institutions that a more unified picture of left and right populism emerges regarding the

gendered character of parties' institutional norms. The politics of both Podemos and the Finns Party continue to be shaped by gendered informal institutions. It is only when these are looked at in closer detail that the masculine politics and ethos of both parties can be discerned.

Formal norms adopted in Podemos's party statutes (Podemos 2015a) establish the principle of non-discrimination among its affiliates on grounds of sex and other inequalities. Through the Yearly Plan of Podemos' executive bodies, the party endorses equality of outcome by supporting the elimination of obstacles to active participation of each gender (Article 2.2.c) including plans of reconciliation, work and family life, and family-care leave. Gender quotas of 40/60 in collective bodies are present in Podemos' statutes, in line with the share established in Spain's Organic Law 3/2007 for the Effective Equality of Women and Men (Lombardo & Verge 2017). However, when the European and national elections occurred at the same time, Podemos applied a zipping system that alternated female and male candidates in their lists. This practice is endorsed in the equality document 'Feminism for All (Women)': 'a minimum quota of 50 percent of women in lists will be established. In primary elections zipper will apply in favour of women to each stretch of five candidates' (Podemos 2017: 24).

By contrast, it has become evident that at the level of formal norms, the Finns Party are opposed to any form of gender quotas. However, in its party statutes the party states that one of its four chair/vice chairpersons must be a woman. While the party does have a women's and men's section, it lacks other formal gender equality measures such as a gender equality plan or programme for the party.

At the informal level, the Finns Party's mindset is deeply masculinist. In addition to policies, the masculine norm is foregrounded in language, metaphors and ethos of the party; and in what they present as the right way to be a politician – namely an 'ordinary bloke' (Palonen & Saresma 2017; Kovala & Pöysä 2017). One might reasonably hypothesise that the privileging of men's experiences and masculinity as the norm of doing politics is more than superficial. In our interview data, the five interviewed women politicians from the Finns Party, in opposition to the public anti-equality image of the party, exhibited great sympathy towards the topic of gender equality. Yet, the interviewees were markedly reticent in talking about gender equality in relation to their party. 'I don't know', 'I'm not an expert on this', 'I have not paid attention to this' were the most common answers. One interviewee suggested that it's 'funny and paradoxical' that the Finns Party has a reputation of being a 'bloke's party' (*äijäpuolue*) but she personally 'felt awfully equal' (Interview, 6 March 2014). The citation is a good example of personalising equality and the difficulty the respondents displayed in seeing the broader inequality structure in their own political party.

Four of the interviewees were MPs and considered their position and their chances to influence party politics as very good due to their formal role as MPs. Despite the reluctance to talk about gender and pinpoint inequality structures, some gendered informal norms were identified. First, inappropriate behaviour towards women candidates, discriminatory or sexist language, and comments from fellow party representatives were mentioned in relation to election work in several interviews (Interviews, 7 March 2014; 16 December 2013; 26 March 2014). Some mentioned that men looked down upon and dominated the views of young women candidates at the local level (Interview, 26 March 2014), others spoke of men behaving 'childishly' out of 'jealousy towards women' (Interview, 7 March 2014). Second,

gendered support structures were identified only as systems where men, first and foremost, support other men (Interviews, 16 December 2013; 7 March 2014, 6 March 2014). Third, it was suggested that the allocation of expertise was gendered. Internal pressure was placed upon women to specialise in social and health matters, while their expertise in relation to 'hard' politics such as defence was routinely questioned (Interview, 26 March 2014). Finally, in the gendered division of work, one interviewee emphasised how the secretary and treasurer jobs go to women, and representative functions and 'nice titles' to men (Interview, 16 December 2013).

Despite the formal promotion of parity in Podemos, informal institutions presented less evidence of feminist political practice. Female politicians criticised the party's informal practices for reproducing male hierarchies and sexist dynamics (Caravantes 2018). Despite the resistance from some quarters, parity measures had been introduced. Nevertheless, Podemos feminists complained that when zipper lists were adopted, they were applied only to Podemos candidates while the affluent groups' lists ended up displacing women and favouring male candidates (Gimeno 2016). They criticised the 'all-male Podemos' candidate list that was proposed in the 2018 primary regional elections in Madrid as a 'patriarchal pact' (see Gil 2018). As one interviewee said: '[T]hree men, Pablo, Iñigo and Ramón Espinar gave a very negative example of patriarchal culture in Podemos ... one image is worth a thousand words!' (Interview, 13 June 2018).

Female politicians with leadership ambitions reported resistance when they proposed themselves for elections:

[A] man was proposed as candidate for the elections, and I had proposed myself, I wanted to be candidate. The response by an important leader in Podemos was: 'But do you *really* consider being an MP?' ... with contempt. (Interview, 25 June 2018)

This MP stated that women's political ambitions were ridiculed in Podemos and, although she worked hard, she did not feel she was either obviously recognised or promoted by the party as men were.

'Leadership is male' say interviewees 'men speak more, we women are more insecure speaking' (Interview, 25 June 2018) and only 'standard self-confident leadership profiles' are considered in 'alfa-male politics' (Interview, 13 September 2018). According to our interviewees, male informal networks are the key to understanding decision making in Podemos and are detrimental to women's careers. Decisions about candidates are made in non-institutional male spaces (e.g., at dinners) or by phone, where agreements made in assemblies are changed (Interviews, 5 July 2018; 25 June 2018; 20 September 2018). Men, they suggest, are more proactive in the use of informal mechanisms and feel a greater entitlement and legitimacy than women often do to call leaders directly and propose their initiatives (Interview, 20 September 2018). Feminist criticism can be counterproductive for women's careers. Some asserted, that when party feminists question male power networks and unequal decisions 'too much', as one interviewee claimed, they would 'trespass a border' ensuring that powerful party men see you as 'the feminist' and thus 'standing out as a person that is not fit for power positions' (Interview, 5 July 2018). This leads some feminist MPs to exercise 'self-censorship' after a few 'tacit resistances' to their proposals because 'you know you will face a wall' (Interview, 13 September 2018).

Hegemonic masculinity is visible in Podemos' 'winning' and 'adversarial style' (Caravantes 2018) that fits poorly with feminist theory and practice. The party's main discourse of championing 'the people' and opposing the 'elite', simplifies and polarises politics by ignoring the diversity within a given people and delegitimises political opponents as anti-people (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). In Podemos, there are 'terrible internal struggles' between different political families (Interview, 25 June 2018) and 'in political conflicts patriarchal culture tends to prevail' (Interview, 13 June 2018). The two main political leaders, Pablo Iglesias and Íñigo Errejón, engaged in a dispute that captivated public attention and fostered a confrontational style that obscured party diversity prior to the Second Citizen's Assembly in 2017 (Caravantes 2018). The democratic mechanism of primary elections adopted in the party favours a constant, violent, intra-party competition that is detrimental to women (Interview, 20 September 2018). Women MPs acknowledge that in the party's daily political life, 'men are more aggressive in their interventions both quantitatively and qualitatively' and women MPs 'are less competitive' and feel more comfortable to talk in committees where more women are present (Interview, 13 June 2018).

The party's focus on 'winning' and its 'aggressive strategy' (Caravantes 2018) were deployed particularly in its initial years when the party was considered an 'electoral war-machine' (see López 2014; Castaño 2014). This was made explicit in Iglesias' speeches where he claimed that 'the duty of a revolutionary is to win' [*La obligación de un revolucionario es ganar*] (quoted in Caravantes 2018; see also Constante 2014) and that 'heaven is not taken by consensus; it is taken by assault' (quoted in Caravantes 2018; see also Hancox 2014). Our interviewees complained about the material dimension of competition: the few positions that men leave for women in the party put female politicians in the centre of 'fierce competitive dynamics' that discourage 'sisterhood practices' (Interview, 25 June 2018), and severely affects the psychological health of female politicians, pushing them to leave their mandates earlier (Interviews, 25 June 2018; 13 September 2018; 20 September 2018). Interviewees who held leadership positions within the party complained about continuous challenges to their leadership and a high level of verbal violence by male party members who felt they would be more legitimate than women to hold such power positions (Interviews, 25 June 2018; 20 September 2018).

Traditional gender roles are also reproduced in Podemos: '[T]here are more men in the committee of economics and more women in health committee ... and "invisible work" is usually performed by women' (Interviews, 13 June 2018; 13 September 2018). The intersection of gender and age tends to privilege men in the party since young women are taken less seriously and perceived as less competent than young men (Interviews, 13 June 2018; 26 June 2018; 20 September 2018). Moreover, despite the centrality of care in Podemos' feminist documents, the reconciliation of family and political life emerges as 'the main obstacle for women MPs, especially young women with children', to which 'no facilities' and 'no solutions have been proposed' in the party. This causes a gendered 'natural selection' of politicians because women have more difficulties participating while 'men have more time and more opportunities' to attend meetings, debates and events as 'Saturday, Sunday, night, weekends ... politics is a time-less commitment' (Interview, 13 June 2018). One interviewee put it clearly, 'when you claim the right to reconciliation and say meetings cannot start at 6 pm, the reply is "then leave the party executive!"' (Interview, 25 June 2018). The result is that MPs with care responsibilities who cannot be present all the time have fewer chances

to shape the discourse and advance their political careers (Interviews, 13 September 2018; 20 September 2018).

Roth and Baird (2017) criticised Podemos' state-level focus on abstract ideas such as 'hegemony', rather than on concrete problems and everyday practices of power. One interviewee denounced them by stating that intellectuality is used to put women at a disadvantage:

They [men] decide what discourses and intellectual issues are important. Why do we women feel more insecure? Because we have other abilities, practices and readings. I didn't spend so much time reading Marx, Trotsky and Lenin, but since it was decided that this is what's worth it, we (women) are in an inferior position. (Interview, 25 June 2018)

'Intellectual arrogance' and predominance of certain discourses in the party creates difficulties for female MPs to defend feminist issues: '[W]hen I defended these [feminist] issues I suffered ... I get tachycardia, I fear these men, so brainy, so well-read ... for whom the body does not exist' (Interview, 25 June 2018).

Despite this shared picture of informal gendered norms shaping the work of women politicians in both left and right populist parties, we discern some important differences between Podemos and the Finns Party in relation to the local level. This is where the feminist politics of Podemos thrives and where the Finns Party women face particular challenges. The victory of civic lists in alliance with Podemos in the 2015 local and regional elections led to increased women's representation among regional MPs (44.6 per cent), local councillors (36 per cent) (Lombardo & Verge 2017), and to the election of female progressive mayors coming from civil society in Madrid and Barcelona. This difference toward feminist politics at the local level is visible both in the empowerment of women and in a different, less confrontational style of doing politics in the two Spanish cities. This appeared in the two female mayors' 'human', 'inclusive' and 'participatory leadership'. In particular, this was shown in their solidarity with, and welcome to, refugees, and significantly, in their calls for democratic dialogue during the conflict over the Catalan independence referendum in autumn 2017 (Interviews, 13 September 2018; 20 September 2018).

In contrast, informal gendered institutions in the Finns Party are particularly strong at the local level. One consistent theme in the interviews was the big gender differences between the national and the local level. The interviewees suggested that national party politicians and representatives understood better the minimum standards required for gender equality – for instance, having both women and men as candidates and in some key positions: 'gender equality needs guidance' (Interview, 7 March 2014). This was argued not to be the case at local level, where promoting and supporting other men and not following party rules was common. This resulted in the need for paternalistic guidance from the national level. Gendered ways of treating women politicians were also more pronounced at the local level. One interviewee described a woman secretary was badly treated at the local level, with a huge work load for no pay, and how the situation changed completely when she was replaced by a man (Interview, 16 December 2013).

In relation to formal and informal institutions of the two populist parties, formal institutions are reflected by respondents in ways that we might have expected. Podemos has put in place a wide range of formal rules designed to ensure parity in representation



and participation, while the Finns Party do not value gender equality in ways that lead them to enshrine commitments in programmes or in the development of rules. A deeper excavation of the informal institutions, however, illustrate the dominance of masculine norms and practices in both parties. In the case of the Finns Party, this masculine ethos is at its worst at the local level, while in Spain, the reverse is true. Social activism at the local level provided a more secure platform for feminist politics in terms of both empowerment and transformation.

### **Women's groups and feminist spaces**

The final dimension we focused upon was spaces within political parties that are dedicated to gender-specific issues. These take the form of women's or men's sections, or feminist spaces (Childs & Kittilson 2016; Kantola 2019). In Finland, the nature of party funding allowed for the establishment of the 'Finns Women' (*Perusnaiset*), which is counter balanced by a men's group the 'Finns Blokes' (*Perusäijät*). In Spain, Podemos has been an important platform for feminist struggles for feminist spaces, which have also been institutionalised in party structures.

Feminism in Finland is often represented 'officially' by the parties' women's organisations. The Finns Women are, unsurprisingly, opposed to any forms of feminist politics. Recent studies by Ylä-Anttila and Luhtakallio (2017) found that unlike all other Finnish parties' women's organisations, the Finns Women make no reference to gender equality or feminism in their mission statement or website. Rather, their goals relate to issues other than gender equality, and equality is defined in terms of socioeconomic equality and age equality. The chairperson of the organisation stated in 2011 that the Finns Women wants to cooperate with men and be 'women not feminists' (Ylä-Anttila & Luhtakallio 2017: 39). Our interviewees framed the role of the women's organisation in terms of providing channels for women to participate in politics:

There are women who want to be part of activities but for them it is a big threshold that they would take part in some elections. But they want to participate. Then the Finns Women is a nice way to act. (Interview, 6 March 2014)

The 'nice way to act' epitomises the non-threatening character of the actions of the organisation. In providing channels for women to enter politics, it undertakes the one task that is acceptable, and deemed necessary, from the point of view of the party itself: the recruitment of more women party activists and candidates (Ylä-Anttila & Luhtakallio 2017). At the same time, the interviewed politician clearly stated that the organisation's activities should not be associated with traditional subordinate women's roles that the interviewee calls 'coffee-making' roles.

Then I see the Finns Women's activities in a way enabling and I don't want that it is considered a coffee making association that 'make some coffee girl'. It is channel for being part of politics and it gets financial support that makes it possible to undertake activities that wouldn't be possible without resources. (Interview, 6 March 2014)

The interviewees also said that the relationship between the party and its women's organisation was close because of personal relations to the leadership (see also Kantola

2019). 'Mutual trust' was a key factor (Interview, 7 March 2014). As the Finns Women is self-declaratory as not being a feminist organisation, and not a strong promoter of either equality in general, or gender equality in particular, it does not challenge the agenda of its populist right party to set itself against the gender equality discourses of Finnish society. Being based on personal relations, in turn, means that the relationship is not institutionalised in terms of representation in different party organs (Interviews, 26 March 2014; 7 March 2014). In the interviews, criticism of the Finns Women was also voiced. One politician suggested that the work of the organisation was 'not very professional':

There are a lot of people who have done voluntary work when there was no party funding or employed personnel. These same people have continued working according to the same principles. As unprofessionally as before. ... [W]hen you look at some of their statements, they are a bit, hmmm. One doesn't look at them admiringly. It's very hobby-like. (Interview, 7 March 2014)

Gender equality has been institutionalised in Podemos through a Secretary of Equality, Feminism and LGBTI and a Circle of Feminism-Podemos both operating at the state and regional levels (Podemos 2017). With either a territorial or a substantive interest, 'circles' are groups of affiliates that meet periodically to discuss political issues. Feminism circles discuss feminist politics, prepare documents to present to general party meetings, organise training and act as 'guardians of equality' by criticising sexist party practices (Interviews, 13 June 2018; 5 July 2018). Feminist and women's groups provide women politicians with space in the form of mutual support and strategy-building, helping them to achieve greater political visibility and influence in a male-dominated world (Interviews 20 September 2018; 5 July 2018).

Feminist debates are alive within Podemos, showing that there is space for a feminist politics to be articulated within the party and society (Interview, 13 June 2018; Gimeno 2017). Debates expressed the need for change, and the desire to pursue a 'feminisation of politics' and 'depatriarchalisation' – both of which are contested concepts within the party. A 'feminisation of politics' alludes to finding new ways of exercising power by sharing, emphasising the necessity for establishing dialogues with diverse actors and promoting relational practices (Caravantes 2018; Serra et al. 2016). 'Depatriarchalisation' focuses upon deconstructing patriarchal practices within the party that perpetuate unequal gender roles; this position highlights the risks in essentialising women into supportive or caring roles that the term 'feminisation' has the potential to suggest (Caravantes 2018; Gimeno 2017, 2016; Podemos 2017; Roth & Baird 2017). However, both feminist positions challenge gender inequalities in Podemos, such as the exclusion of women from decision making, a predominantly male leadership, hierarchical structures and practices, competitive and centralised logics that oppose equality and diversity, stereotypical gender roles, and the lack of prioritisation for gender equality (Interviews, 25 June 2018; 5 July 2018; Caravantes 2018).

We conclude that in relation to women's and feminist spaces in the political parties, the stark difference between left populist Podemos and right populist the Finns Party arises from their gender lines. Feminist spaces have been empowering for women's action and feminist politics in Podemos. They have enabled lively debates about the contents and directions of feminist politics, and the critiques of the party's patriarchal practices. The Finns Women, in contrast, is anti-feminist, operating on political concerns other than those of gender equality.

Its most obvious role is to bring women into politics. It is with regard to notions of women's groups and feminist spaces that the differences between the parties, the political cultures they are embedded in and, significantly, the role of political ideology matters.

## Conclusion

Analysing different dimensions of gender in populist parties has enabled us to show the variations in feminist politics in Podemos and the Finns Party. Focusing on a singular dimension, such as descriptive representation, substantive representation, formal and informal institutions, or women's groups and feminist spaces, would only generate a partial picture and most likely obscure some of the tensions involved in populist politics from a feminist point of view. Instead, a multidimensional approach has given a broader picture of feminist politics within left and right populist parties, enabling us to draw the following conclusions.

First, political ideology matters. Left-wing parties, though populist, are still better allies of feminist politics than right-wing parties both in terms of empowerment and transformation. In the case of Podemos, women's descriptive representation in parliament is higher, relative to prior national percentages, than the Finns Party. Substantive representation also shows that feminism is a present and tangible political voice aiming at transforming unequal gendered power relations in the public discourse and in the parliamentary proposals of Podemos. Basic formal gender equality norms have been included in the party statutes and the women's party section explicitly mentions feminism and LGBT people. The Finns Party are more explicitly anti-feminist in their ideology, substantive proposals and women's party institutions, opposing formal norms about positive actions and promoting conservative, family-centred ideas of gender equality.

Second, regardless of their ideology, populist parties reproduce the same informal patriarchal institutions that gender and politics literature has found in other parties. The informal norm of the ideal male candidate, based on characteristics of stereotypical masculinity, prevails in both populist parties and is reproduced through informal socialisation practices. Leadership is male in Podemos and the Finns Party, and so are the more powerful positions. Aggressive and competitive is the political style of both parties, with politicians performing the 'ordinary bloke' in the Finns Party or the 'victorious revolutionary' in Podemos. Sexist behaviour and comments, as well as stereotypical gender roles are especially present in the Finns Party, but they exist in Podemos too – a stark illustration that feminism is far from shaping the core power dynamics of the party. These informal party practices serve to perpetuate patriarchy and marginalise women and feminist politics.

Findings regarding informal practices of hegemonic masculinity problematise Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser's (2013) claim about inclusionary left populism and exclusionary right populism. While the analysis of women's descriptive and substantive representation confirms the exclusionary aspect of right populism and the inclusionary character of left populism, Podemos' informal gendered practices that hinder women's participation and leadership challenge this. National-local dynamics bring further elements that nuance the inclusionary-exclusionary claim. While local politics confirms inclusionary left populism, with Podemos and social activism opening opportunities for the expression of feminist

political styles, the Finns Party political style is very gender unequal at the local level. It is slightly less so at the national level, yet we have pointed to many gender inequality challenges at this level too.

Finally, the analysis of feminist politics brings out a striking similarity between left and right populism: the ethos of hegemonic masculinity. This is apparent in the informal gendered institutions and the aggressive and confrontational style of politics both parties articulate. In Podemos, the construction of a binary antagonism between the people and the elite risks simplifying politics by ignoring gender and diversity within the people. Its electoral 'winning' discourse challenges the theory and practice of feminism and risks sacrificing equality issues in the fight for political power. Combined with personalised male disputes for power, Podemos has created a confrontational climate that is unfavourable to women's political action and feminist politics. In the Finns Party, the confrontation between 'the ordinary blokes' and the elite has similar effects on women and feminist politics. The staging of politics as a win-lose competitive context reinforces sexist domination and hierarchies and is the opposite of a political credo that emphasises collective leadership, cooperative and participatory decision making that feminist politics advocates (Caravantes 2018; Roth & Baird 2017). This reflects a contradiction between populism and feminism that has less to do with political discourse and more with a political praxis that is imbued with hegemonic masculinity and confrontation. While both are common features of political parties, populism's emphasis on a bellicose political style is especially problematic for feminist politics. Future studies ought to address this masculine ethos more in-depth, investigating styles, emotions and symbolic representation issues deployed by populist parties so to further unpack the tensions between populism and feminist politics.

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## Notes

1. The Finns Party split into two in 2017 and the new gender balance in the parliamentary group is worse than before: 23.5 per cent women MPs and 26.3 per cent women in the break-away 'Blue parliamentary group'.
2. See <https://podemos.info/organizacion/>
3. See [https://igualeseintransferibles.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Prop\\_Ley\\_PPIINA\\_29Nov2016.pdf](https://igualeseintransferibles.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Prop_Ley_PPIINA_29Nov2016.pdf)

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